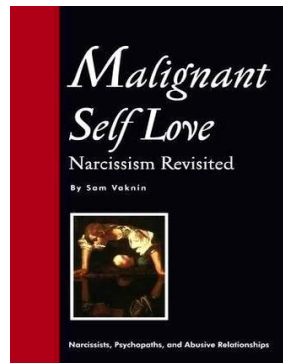


The Demise of the Work Ethic

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***"When work is a pleasure, life is a joy! When work is a duty, life is slavery."
Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), Russian novelist, author, and playwright***

Airplanes, missiles, and space shuttles crash due to lack of maintenance, absent-mindedness, and pure ignorance. Software support personnel, aided and abetted by Customer Relationship Management application suites, are curt (when reachable) and unhelpful. Despite expensive, state of the art supply chain management systems, retailers, suppliers, and manufacturers habitually run out of stocks of finished and semi-finished products and raw materials. People from all walks of life and at all levels of the corporate ladder skirt their responsibilities and neglect their duties.

Whatever happened to the work ethic? Where is the pride in the immaculate quality of one's labor and produce?

Both dead in the water. A series of earth-shattering social, economic, and technological trends converged to render their jobs loathsome to many - a tedious nuisance best avoided.

1. ***Job security*** is a thing of the past. Itinerancy in various McJobs reduces the incentive to invest time, effort, and resources into a position that may not be yours next week. Brutal layoffs and downsizing traumatized the workforce and produced in the typical workplace a culture of obsequiousness, blind obeisance, the suppression of independent thought and speech, and avoidance of initiative and innovation. Many offices and shop floors now resemble prisons.

2. ***Outsourcing and offshoring*** of back office (and, more recently, customer relations and research and development) functions sharply and adversely effected the quality of services from helpdesks to airline ticketing and from insurance claims processing to remote maintenance. Cultural mismatches between the (typically Western) client base and the offshore service department (usually in a developing country where labor is cheap and plenty) only exacerbated the breakdown of trust between customer and provider or supplier.

3. The populace in developed countries are addicted to ***leisure time***. Most people regard their jobs as a necessary evil, best avoided whenever possible. Hence phenomena like the permanent temp - employees who prefer a succession of temporary assignments to holding a proper job. The media and the arts contribute to this perception of work as a drag - or a potentially dangerous addiction (when they portray raging and abusive workaholics).

4. The other side of this dismal coin is ***workaholism*** - the addiction to work. Far from valuing it, these addicts resent their dependence. The job performance of the typical workaholic leaves a lot to be desired. Workaholics are fatigued, suffer from ancillary addictions, and short attention spans. They frequently abuse substances, are [narcissistic](#) and destructively competitive (being driven, they are incapable of team work).

5. The ***depersonalization of manufacturing*** - the intermediated divorce between the artisan/worker and his client - contributed a lot to the indifference and alienation of the common industrial worker, the veritable "anonymous cog in the machine".

Not only was the link between worker and product broken - but the bond between artisan and client was severed as well. Few employees know their customers or patrons first hand. It is hard to empathize with and care about a statistic, a buyer whom you have never met and never likely to encounter. It is easy in such circumstances to feel immune to the consequences of one's negligence and apathy at work. It is impossible to be proud of what you do and to be committed to your

work - if you never set eyes on either the final product or the customer! Charlie Chaplin's masterpiece, "Modern Times" captured this estrangement brilliantly.

6. Many former employees of mega-corporations abandon the rat race and establish their own businesses - *small and home enterprises*. Undercapitalized, understaffed, and outperformed by the competition, these fledgling and amateurish outfits usually spew out shoddy products and lamentable services - only to expire within the first year of business.

7. Despite decades of advanced notice, *globalization* caught most firms the world over by utter surprise. Ill-prepared and fearful of the onslaught of foreign competition, companies big and small grapple with logistical nightmares, supply chain calamities, culture shocks and conflicts, and rapacious competitors. Mere survival (and opportunistic managerial plunder) replaced client satisfaction as the prime value.

8. The decline of the *professional guilds* on the one hand and the trade unions on the other hand greatly reduced worker self-discipline, pride, and peer-regulated quality control. Quality is monitored by third parties or compromised by being subjected to Procrustean financial constraints and concerns.

The investigation of malpractice and its punishment are now at the hand of vast and ill-informed bureaucracies, either corporate or governmental. Once malpractice is exposed and admitted to, the availability of malpractice insurance renders most sanctions unnecessary or toothless. Corporations prefer to bury mishaps and malfeasance rather than cope with and rectify them.

9. The quality of one's work, and of services and products one consumed, used to be guaranteed. One's personal idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and problems were left at home. Work was sacred and one's sense of self-worth depended on the satisfaction of one's clients. You simply didn't let your personal life affect the standards of your output.

This strict and useful separation vanished with the rise of the [malignant-narcissistic](#) variant of *individualism*. It led to the emergence of idiosyncratic and fragmented standards of quality. No one knows what to expect, when, and from whom. Transacting business has become a form of psychological warfare. The customer has to rely on the goodwill of suppliers, manufacturers, and service providers - and often finds himself at their whim and mercy. "The client is always right" has gone the way of the dodo. "It's my (the supplier's or provider's) way or the highway" rules supreme.

This uncertainty is further exacerbated by the pandemic eruption of mental health disorders - 15% of the population are severely pathologized according to the latest

studies. Antisocial behaviors - from outright crime to pernicious passive-aggressive sabotage - once rare in the workplace, are now abundant.

The ethos of teamwork, tempered collectivism, and collaboration for the greater good is now derided or decried. Conflict on all levels has replaced negotiated compromise and has become the prevailing narrative. Litigiousness, vigilante justice, use of force, and "getting away with it" are now extolled. Yet, conflicts lead to the misallocation of economic resources. They are non-productive and not conducive to sustaining good relations between producer or provider and consumer.

10. ***Moral relativism*** is the mirror image of rampant individualism. Social cohesion and discipline diminished, ideologies and religions crumbled, and anomic states substituted for societal order. The implicit contracts between manufacturer or service provider and customer and between employee and employer were shredded and replaced with ad-hoc negotiated operational checklists. Social decoherence is further enhanced by the anonymization and depersonalization of the modern chain of production (see point 5 above).

Nowadays, people facilely and callously abrogate their responsibilities towards their families, communities, and nations. The mushrooming rate of divorce, the decline in personal thrift, the skyrocketing number of personal bankruptcies, and the ubiquity of venality and corruption both corporate and political are examples of such dissipation. No one seems to care about anything. Why should the client or employer expect a different treatment?

As Weber observed largely correctly, the Protestant work ethic underlies the rise of modern capitalism. Calvinism regarded work as a form of worship and success as proof of divine approval. Protestants of all creeds valued time - God's-given gift - and sought to maximize its benefits.

But the Puritan and Non-conformist [empathic](#) values of a Commonwealth wherein everyone is equal before God and therefore deserves to be treated well and with respect were abandoned along the way. Even the infusion of Jewish values - charity, community, industriousness, the idea of progress and self-betterment, learning, and pragmatism - in the late 19th century failed to stop the erosion in communality and the rise of [malignant, short-sighted narcissism](#), the anathema of the work ethic.

11. The ***disintegration of the educational systems*** of the West made it difficult for employers to find qualified and motivated personnel. Courtesy, competence, ambition, personal responsibility, the ability to see the bigger picture (synoptic view), interpersonal aptitude, analytic and synthetic skills, not to mention numeracy, literacy, access to technology, and the sense of belonging which they foster - are all products of proper schooling.

12. ***Irrational beliefs***, pseudo-sciences, and the occult rushed in to profitably fill the vacuum left by the crumbling education systems. These wasteful preoccupations encourage in their followers an overpowering sense of fatalistic determinism and hinder their ability to exercise judgment and initiative. The discourse of commerce and finance relies on [unmitigated rationality](#) and is, in essence, contractual. Irrationality is detrimental to the successful and happy exchange of goods and services.

13. Employers place ***no premium on work ethic***. Workers don't get paid more or differently if they are more conscientious, or more efficient, or more friendly. In an interlinked, globalized world, customers are fungible. There are so many billions of potential clients that customer loyalty has been rendered irrelevant. Marketing, showmanship, and [narcissistic bluster](#) are far better appreciated by workplaces because they serve to attract clientele to be bilked and then discarded or ignored.

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